DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 992 HE 011 895

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TITLE Declining ACT Scores and Grade Inflation at Southeastern Louisiana University.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Aptitude Tests; *Grade Inflation; *Grades (Scholastic); Higher Education; Institutional Research; *Standardized Tests; *Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS *American College Testing Program; *Southeastern Louisiana University

ABSTRACT

Grade reports of Southeastern Louisiana University from 1970-71 through 1978-79 were examined to determine whether grade inflation occurred in relation to scores on the American College Testing (ACT) program. Both ACT and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores have been declining nationally, while university registrars report that student grades at the A and B level have been increasing. At Southeastern Louisiana University, A grades increased a full percentage point each year during the decade of the study until the peak was reached in the 1974-75 school year. Rather precipitous drops then occurred until 1977-78. B grades see-sawed back and forth until 1972-73 when they began dropping a percentage point per year, plateauing in the 1976-77 year, then falling to a lower stage for the next two years. C grades declined steadily except for a three-year plateau, and D grades remained fairly constant throughout most of the period except for the peak year of the A grades. A-grade inflation like that which has occurred in academia across the United States is indicated. (SW)

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ABSTRACT

Declining ACT and SAT scores have been watched by university registrars, administrators, and test publishers since the phenomenon began in the '60's. An equally disturbing phenomenon was observed simultaneously by registrars--A's and B's were increasing in number as the ACT and SAT scores declined. This study takes the grade reports of Southeastern Louisiana University from 1970-71 through 1978-79, and shows the grade inflation vs. ACT decline at that institution.

Remigius David, S. C., Ed. D., professor of accounting at Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond, LA, compiled the data and prepared the charts presented here. Before joining the university ranks he served for many years as teacher and administrator in private schools in the Gulf States.

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DECLINING ACT SCORES AND GRADE INFLATION AT SOUTHEASTERN LOUISIANA UNIVERSITY

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A national phenomenon of declining scores on the two tests used to predict high school student success in college has been observed and intensively studied by the test publishers and many educational researchers. The tests referred to are the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Testing (ACT) program.

The decline began in the mid-1960's and has continued through the most recently reported scores of 1978-79 (EXHIBIT I), although SAT reports the same verbal score as last year with only a two point drop in the math score.

At the same time that ACT and SAT scores were declining, it was reported by university registrars across the country that students grades at the A and B level were increasing and that C's, D's, and F's were declining.

Research studies by ACT and others doing independent research have verified the fact that the tests are essentially

equally predictive of college grades of any minority or disadvantaged students as they are for middle-class white students. The battery of tests is designed to present a comprehensive picture of a student as far as his educational development is concerned and is not intended to be a measure of IQ or innate intelligence. Therefore, low scores are a reflection of low educational accomplishment whether resulting from limited opportunity or lack of academic motivation.

Since the tests measure the current status of a student's educational development and academic abilities, the interpretive booklet, "Using ACT on Campus," states that the "test scores are necessarily lower for students for whom social factors have interferred with educational development."(1)

With four subject-area tests measuring accomplishment in English, social studies, natural science, and mathematics, the ACT Assessment Program provides an indication of the student's level of educational development. The mean ACT composite score for college-bound high school seniors is 18 (EXHIBIT II). Scores between 14 and 19 are generally considered low average; and scores from 19 to 24, consequently, should be considered high average. Scores above 24 indicate students of clearly superior educational attainment while scores below 14 indicate students with much more restricted educational development.

Thus, the tests attempt to assess each student's general educational development and ability to do college-level work. The student is also required to demonstrate both problem-

solving and reasoning abilities.

Munday (2) found that the mean ACT score decline over the ten years prior to his report had been at the rate of two or three percent of a standard deviation per year. He found variation in subject matter fields, and a marked difference in scores between men and women. He also noted that the percentage of women taking the test had increased from 48 to 52.5 percent during the period of his study.

Edson (3) contends that the theory attributing the SAT score decline to increased numbers of minority students taking the test is not supported by evidence since the proportion of minority students taking the SAT has remained constant at 14 percent during the period of greatest decline from 1972 to 1975. He further criticizes the critics for tending to ignore the fact that the SAT has been used for identifying many qualified and talented minority students who otherwise would have been excluded from attending college on purely racial or social grounds. He also cautions that the predictive ability of the tests does not extend beyond the freshman year scores.

As reported by ACT, no test or test item is ever repeated. A completely new set of tests is administed each year--a test that had been at least two-and-a-half years in development stages. Item writers, who remain anonymous, include high school, college, and university instructors in the four disciplines of the assessment test selected from institutions around the country. The material is carefully edited, reviewed by other specialists, pre-tested, and again reviewed for content and bias.

This article is a study of the phenomena of declining ACT scores and grade inflation using data on the national, state (Louisiana), and local (Southeastern Louisiana University) levels. The full cooperation of the vice president for academic affairs, the testing and guidance director, and the registrar made this study possible.

To establish a standard for comparison the composite national ACT scores of the years 1962-65 were used (EXHIBIT III). SLU scores are shown at the year of highest inflation, 1974-75.

The next five exhibits (EXHIBITS IV-VIII) show the graphs of grades for the university's entire student body compiled from grade-analysis computer printouts. A's increased a full percentage point each year during the decade of the study until the peak was reached in the 1974-75 school year (EXHIBIT IV). Rather precipitous drops then occurred until a 1977-78 recovery stopped the slide. The overlay on each graph is the composite ACT scores of the same student bodies.

B grades (EXHIBIT V) seesawed back and forth until 1972-73 when this grade level began dropping a percentage point per year, plateauing in the 1976-77 year, then falling to a lower stage for the next two years. During the period under study the number of C's declined steadily (EXHIBIT VI) until plateauing for three years and then showing a further decline at the end of the decade as the B's leveled off and the A's dropped again.

D's (EXHIBIT VII) remained fairly constant throughout most of the period except for the peak year of the A's; since then a slight resurgence of D's is noted as the A's bottomed

out and C's continued skidding. F's (EXHIBIT VIII) followed the ACT drop until the peak year of the A's, then took a sharp turn upward before leveling off.

Students who dropped courses are not tabulated in this study; therefore, total percentages of any year will be short by the percentage of W's.

Non-conclusions.

How does one diagnose a phenomenon? What made 1974-75 so different? ACT scores continued dropping nationally yet this was the year of the largest percentage of A's, the smallest percentage but also a turning point for D's and F's, and B's and C's continued their downward trend.

Some writers have tried to draw inferences from these descending-ascending score phenomena. A number of broad-based reasons have been cited--increased enrollments, general leveling of ability among students, World War II "baby boom," Vietnam, inexperienced faculty, culture bias. Psychologists may have much to say but none will show any more substance than the comment of a faculty member who said: "What grades would you give if your continuing contract depended on keeping unhappy students out of the dean's office?"

These data do leave one wondering, however, if an annual follow-up of an ACT-type test with letter grades assigned to a university's student body by relation to the national normal curve would have shown an A-inflation like that which has occurred in academia across the United States.

CITATIONS

(1) "Using ACT on Campus," 1977-78, p. 4.

(2) Leo A. Munday, Declining Admission Test Scores. American College Testing Program, Research and Development Division, Iowa City, IA, ACT-RR-71, February 1976, p. 3.

(3) C. H. Edson, Why Scholastic Aptitude Test Scores Are Falling. Center for Educational Policy and Management, Oregon University, Eugene, OR, February 1976, pp. 7, 21, 26.

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EXHIBIT I

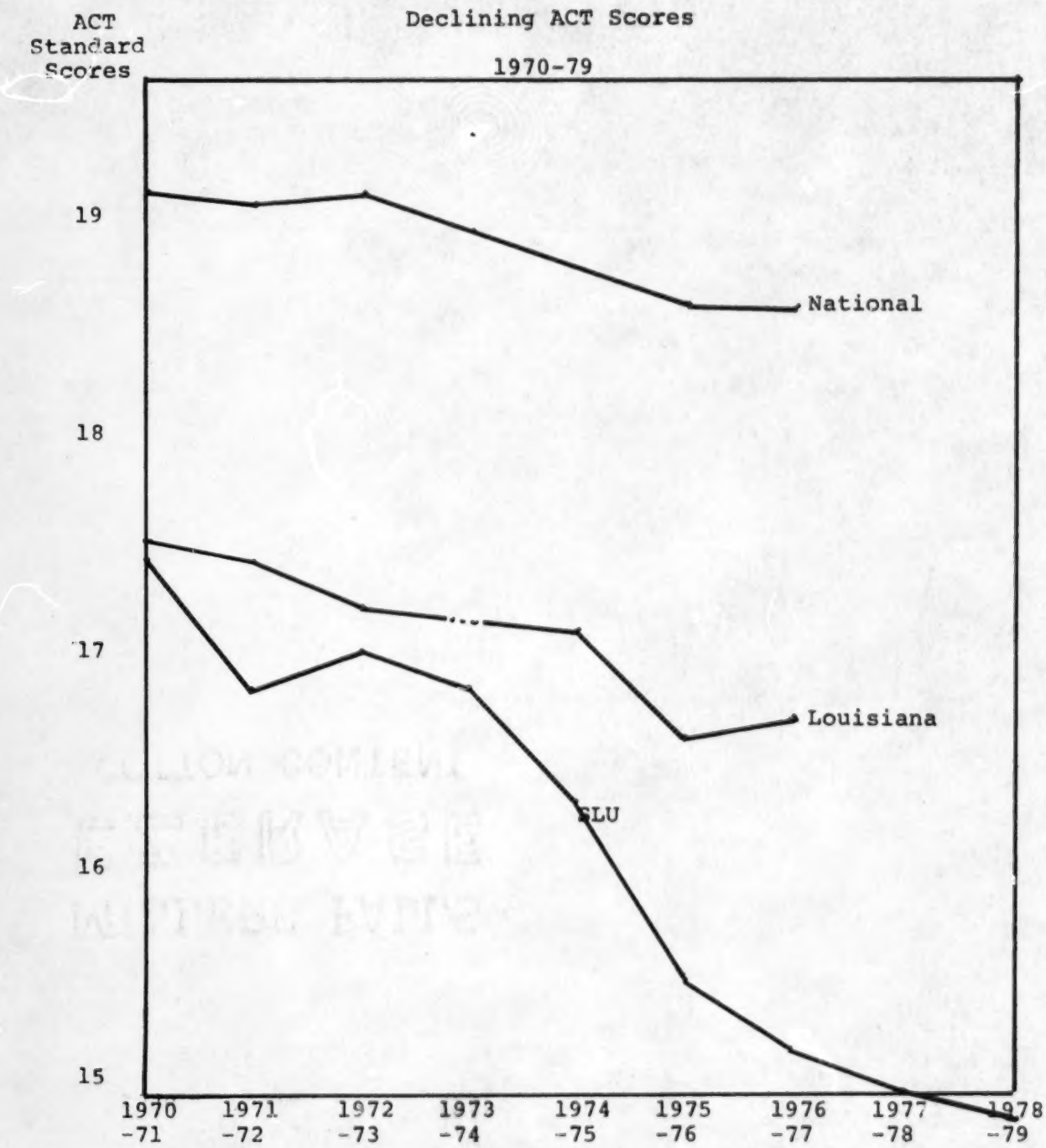
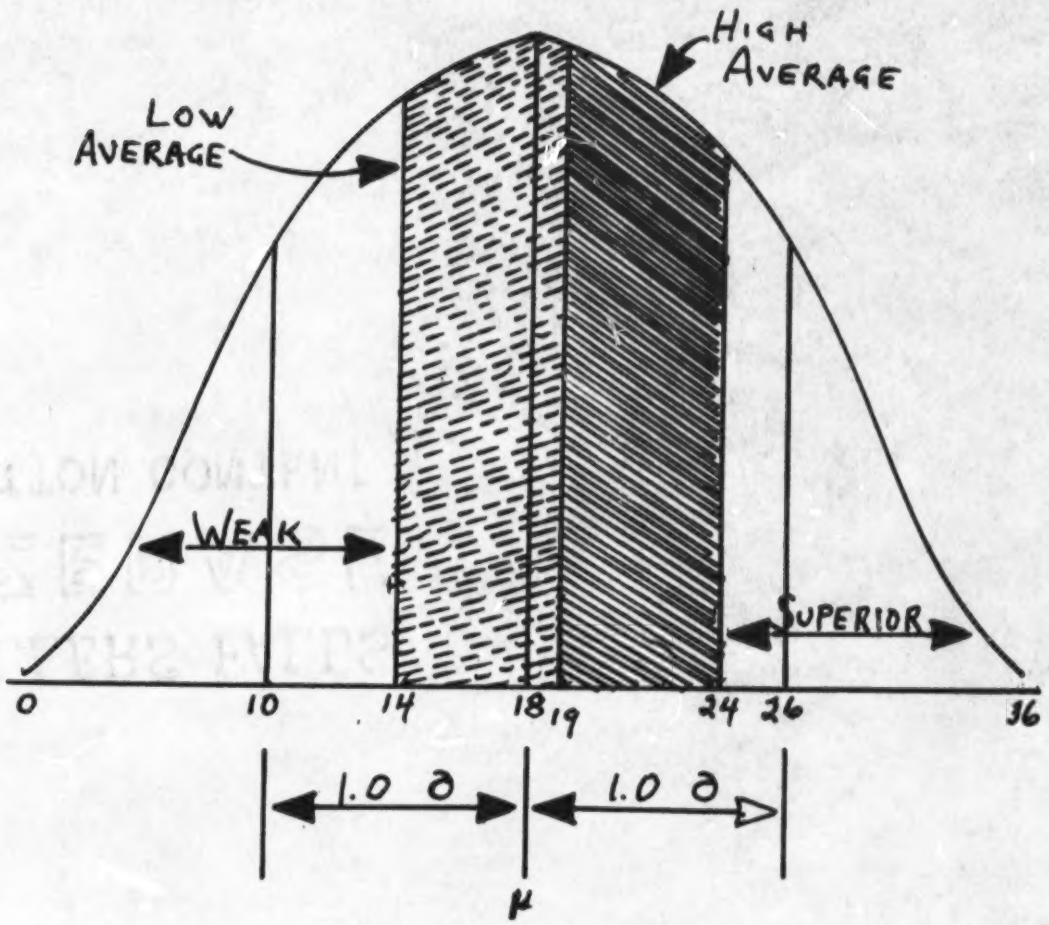

ACT Standard Scores
Declining ACT Scores
1970-79
19
18
17
16
15
National
Louisiana
LU
1970 -71
1971 -72
1972 -73
1973 -74
1974 -75
1975 -76
1976 -77
1977 -78
1978 -79

EXHIBIT II

ACT Normal Curve

Freshman Success Prediction

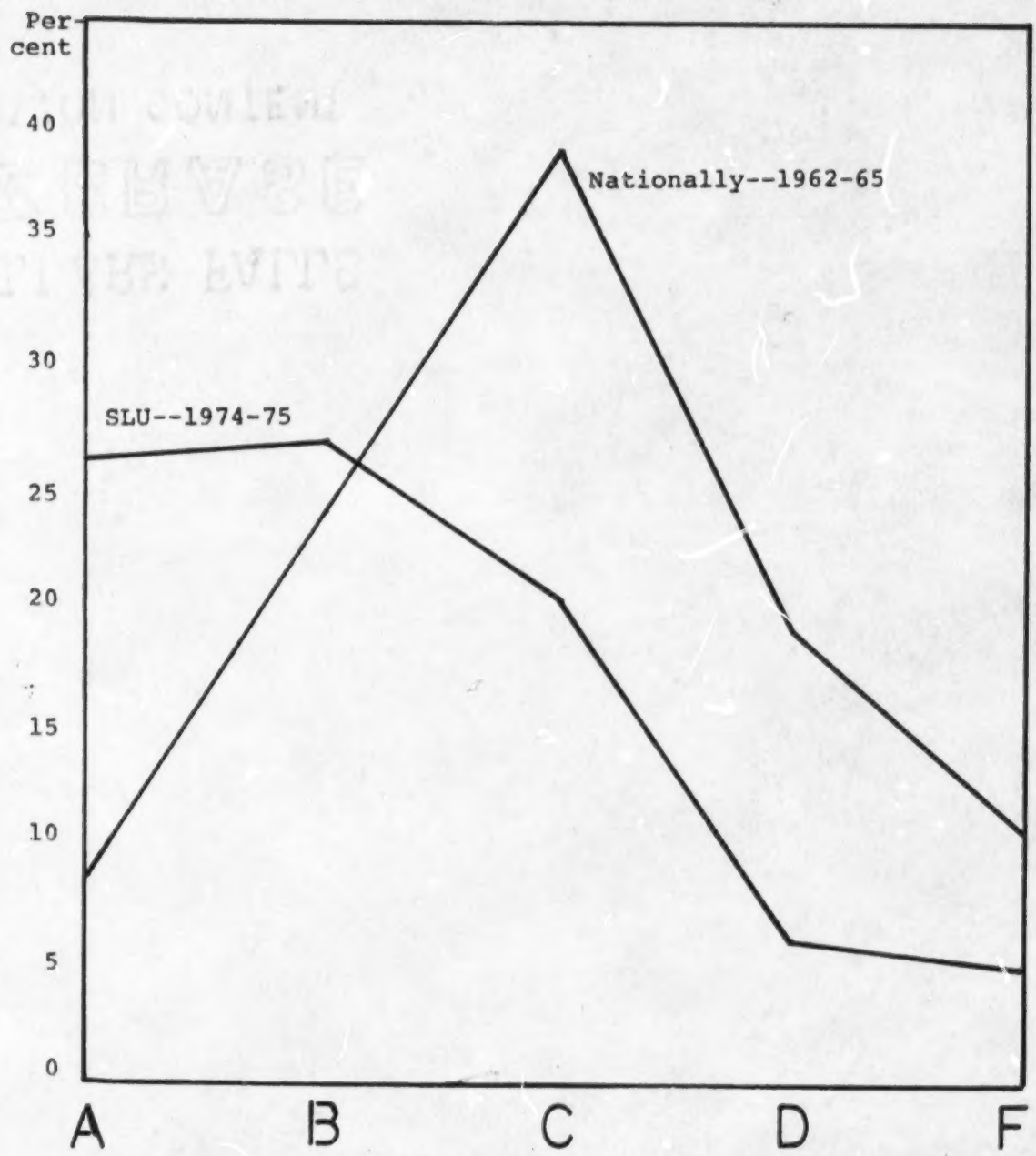


ACT Standard Score Scale

Range	1 - 36
Mean	18±
Standard Deviation	5 - 8
Standard Error	1 - 2

Distribution of Grades Reported for ACT Testees who Subsequently Enrolled in College

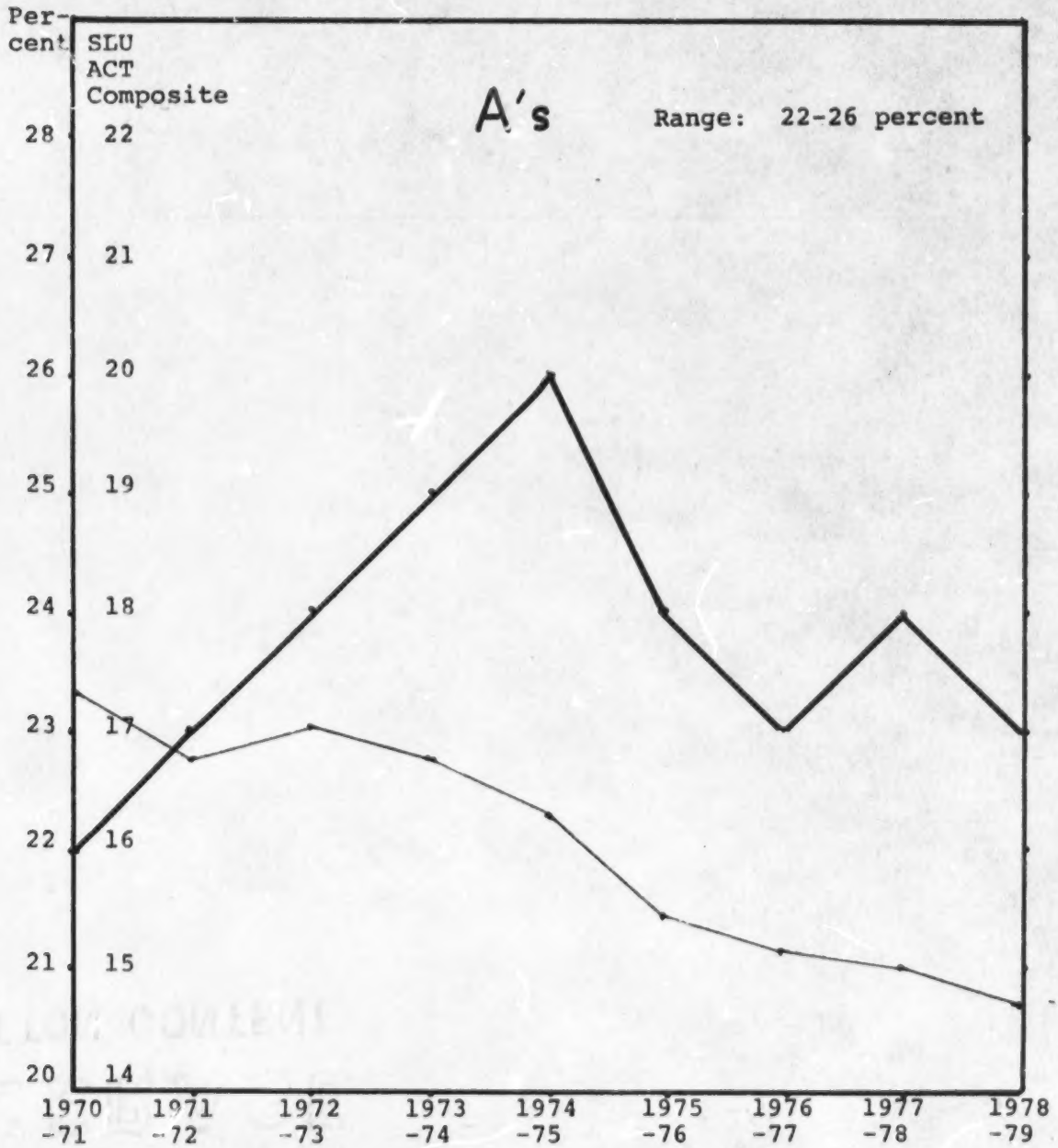
EXHIBIT III



Source: Data compiled by writer from ACT Standard Research Service, 1962-75.

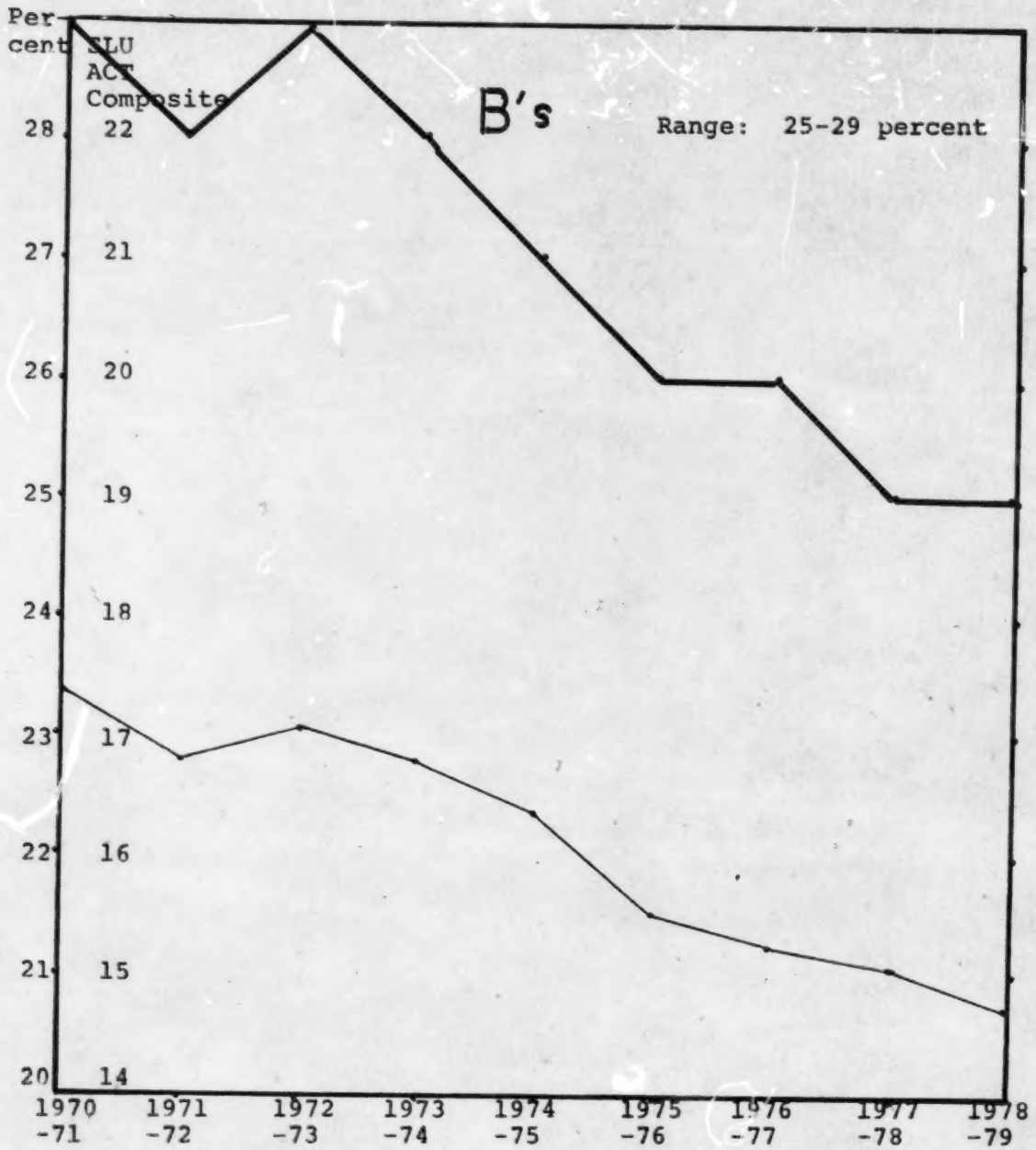
University Composite of Grades EXHIBIT IV

as Percent of Total Tests Reported



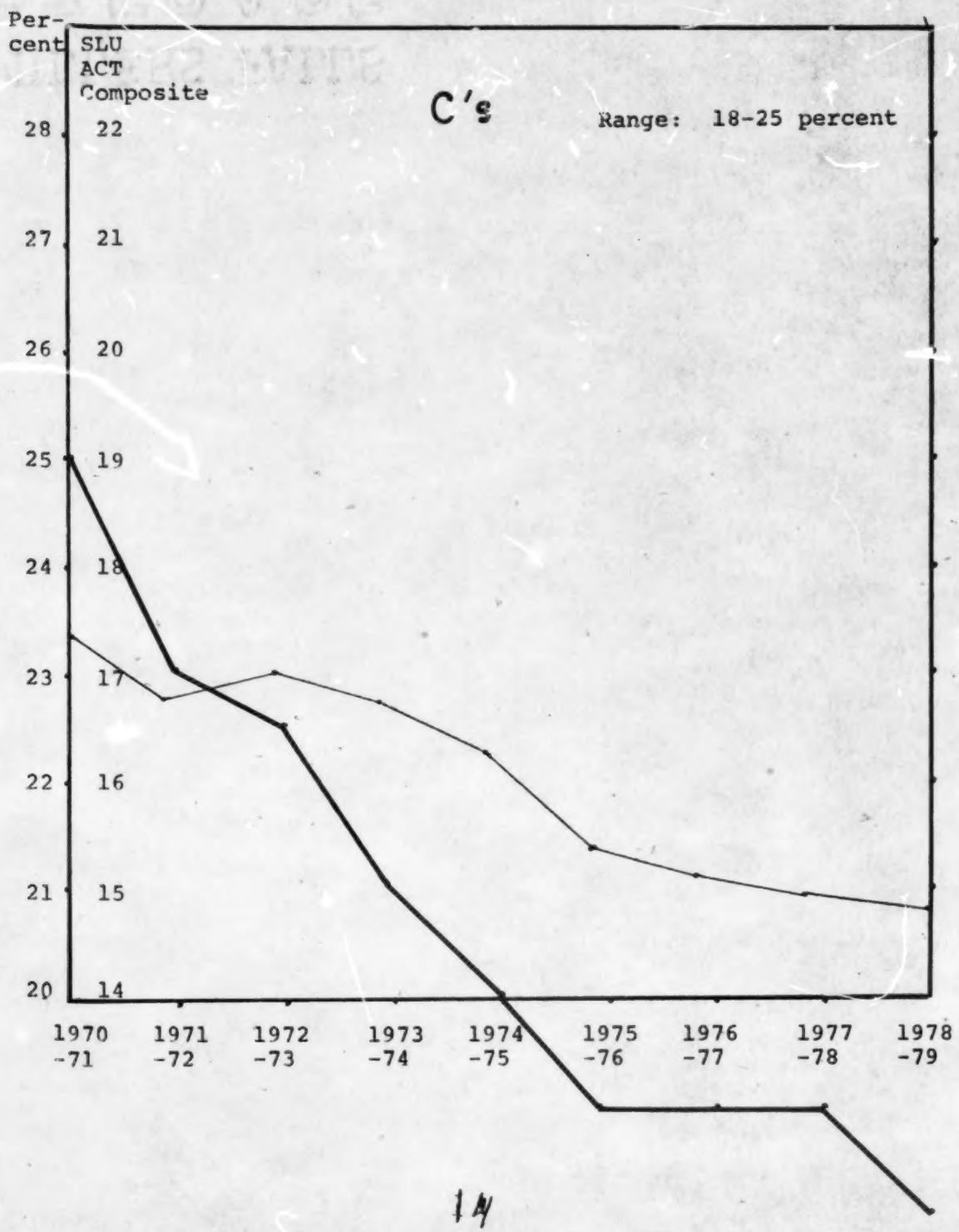
University Composite of Grades EXHIBIT V

as Percent of Total Tests Reported



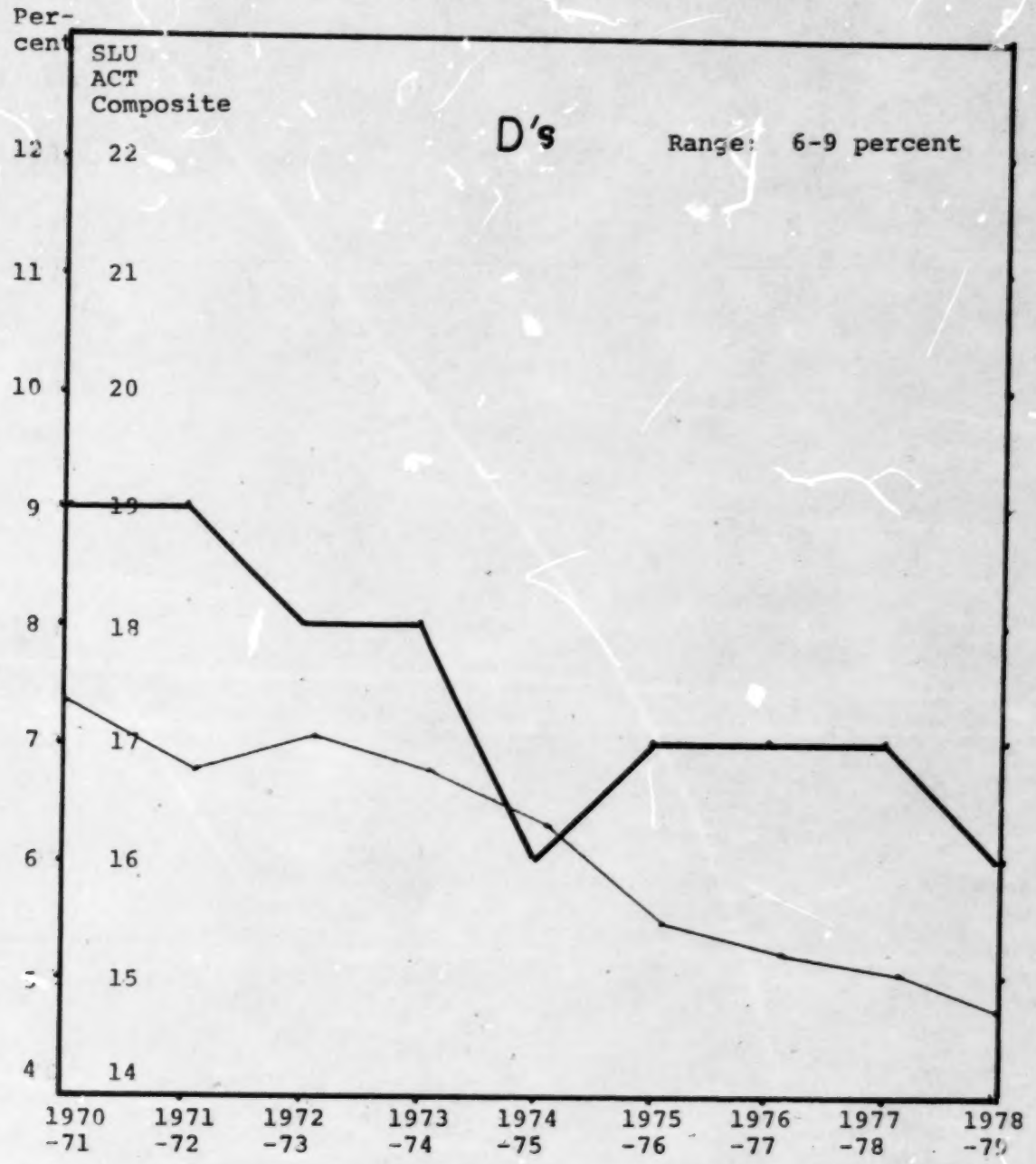
University Composite of Grades EXHIBIT VI

as Percent of Total Tests Reported



University Composite of Grades EXHIBIT VII

as Percent of Total Tests Reported



University Composite of Grades EXHIBIT VIII

as Percent of Total Tests Reported